



ONES TO WATCH

Take two

Disenchanted with their life as soloists, couple Stephanie Kai-Win Ho and Saar Ahuvia joined forces as DUO Stephanie & Saar – with fascinating results.
By Benjamin Ivry

Nothing apparently predestined Stephanie Kai-Win Ho, born in Taipei in 1977, to form one of the leading younger piano ensembles, DUO Stephanie & Saar, with Saar Ahuvia, born in 1974 at Kibbutz Beit Hashita in northern Israel. Yet before meeting while studying at Baltimore's Peabody Institute, both were inspired independently by the pedagogue and duo pianist Karl Ulrich Schnabel (1909–2001), as I learned when chatting with the New York-based married couple by phone. Stephanie studied with Darlene Cusick, who invited Schnabel – the son and duo partner of Artur Schnabel – to teach masterclasses in Oregon. Saar had his own brush with the Schnabels while studying in Switzerland with Daniel Höxter, meeting family members and admiring the records of Karl Ulrich. So by the time Stephanie and Saar met, Saar recalls, 'I thought we were kindred spirits'.

In Baltimore they met Leon Fleisher, a student of both Schnabels, who encouraged them to play piano duos. As an undergraduate at Oberlin College, Stephanie had studied

religion and piano performance, admitting: 'If there's any similarity [between the two subjects], it's that one encourages curiosity about the other; one of the important things about art is to encourage curiosity. As musicians, we must keep that hunger.' Saar had his own hunger, having first prepared for a solo career with the eminent Arie Vardi before opting for chamber music: 'I was a little burned out, and was looking for something more enjoyable, less in the centre of things. When I discovered piano duo playing and specifically playing with Stephanie, it was somehow more fun than being alone on stage. It brought back, for me, the element of play in music.'

Part of the fun was choosing a name for their ensemble, as Stephanie reflects: 'We were talking to [pianist] Israella Margalit and told her, "We like our own names," so she said, "Well, use your own names". [However] Ho and Ahuvia sounds like a pharmaceutical company or something!' Hence the name 'DUO Stephanie & Saar'. Even more engaging was the process of endless rehearsals needed to arrive at their artistic goals. Unlike the piano duos who seem in perfect unison – like twin synchronised swimmers or pairs skaters – they prefer 'battling each other a bit,' says Saar, 'as when Martha Argerich plays with anyone in a duo, and you can sense a little pull and tug. We belong to the category of different personalities who have to come to an agreement. Any piece we rehearse will start out with different tempos, and we have to work our way through it. The element of friction creates excitement and interest for us.'

Both excitement and interest are audible on DUO Stephanie & Saar's debut CD, *Visions* (2010), which includes emotionally astute performances of works by Schubert, Debussy, and Janáček, among others. Even more impressive are Bach and Frescobaldi transcriptions by Kurtág, to be featured on a new CD slated for release in 2012. Stephanie notes: 'The most amazing thing about the Kurtág transcriptions is that they are from Bach's cantatas, which most solo pianists don't know that well. We feel that Bach's solo keyboard works are very different from his choral works... [they] are pedagogical and virtuosic. Kurtág's transcriptions are very spiritual; you get a sense of that seriousness and darkness and a whole new kind of Bach, very enlightened, a kind of Man of God you don't hear in the preludes and fugues, which are so technique-driven, so hard to play. It's very educational to us and opening our sensibilities.'

The duo's range of sensibilities is wide, also embracing jazz. Indeed, they created their own four-hand transcription of Bill Evans's solo *A Time for Love*. 'We're taking [Evans's] sublime perfect solos and making them conversations,' Saar says. '[Evans's] left-hand improvisations are so thick that if you have one person play them they can become something on their own. He is so complex and classical.'

Whether playing on one piano four-hands, or on two separate pianos, complexities are resolved – with Saar looking at Stephanie, rather than vice-versa – before they launch into a performance. Saar notes: 'It's just one of those funny things one does on stage; she's very focused and I just kind of watch her and get some sort of communication that we're on the same page.' 🎵

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